

Why did the “Final Solution” unfold differently in different contexts? What factors influenced how (or how thoroughly) the genocide of European Jewry was carried out? Your answer should draw on at least two of the following contexts; Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Northern Europe, Southeastern Europe (the Balkans), Western Europe, or North Africa.

The “Final Solution” – the Nazi plan for the annihilation of European Jewry – was not a homogeneous process but one deeply influenced by the nuances of regional contexts. The genocide's execution was swayed by a complex web of factors such as the size and acculturation of the Jewish population, legal status of Jews, occupying power of a region, resistance or collaboration of local governments and people, geography, and progression of the war itself.

Eastern Europe, being the Holocaust's epicenter, experienced the harshest implementation of the Final Solution, primarily due to the considerable Jewish population, their comparatively lower integration, and the content of the prevailing Nazi ideologies. With 72% of all European Jews residing in Eastern Europe, the region held a significant concentration of Jewish populations, many of whom were less acculturated and therefore more visible than their Western counterparts. The situation was further aggravated by the pervasive Nazi ideology that classified Poles and Slavs as inferior races (Sarah Stein, “Acclimating to Mass Murder,” 2023). The presence of large Jewish populations amidst the “expendable” Poles and Slavs intertwined the genocide with the territorial expansion for the “Aryan” race, creating a uniquely brutal synthesis of ethnic cleansing and spatial conquest unparalleled in any other region (Browning 160). The substantial and less acculturated Jewish presence combined with the extraordinary brutality of battle made Eastern Europe the most catastrophic site of the Final Solution.

While the Eastern Front under direct German control bore the brunt of the Final Solution, there was considerable variability in its implementation in non-German occupied territories, particularly in regard to Jews with citizenship. For instance, Bulgaria, a Nazi ally presiding over Thrace, Macedonia, and part of Serbia, persistently defied German edicts throughout the war. When forced by the Third Reich to agree to the deportation of 20,000 Jews to death camps, Bulgaria chose to preserve the lives of its Jewish citizens by deporting stateless Jews from Macedonia and Thrace, thereby protecting 98% of native Bulgarian Jews (Sarah Stein, “Southern Europe,” 2023). However, this policy resulted in a tragically high death toll among the stateless Jews in Macedonia, evidenced by the scarce survivors such as Jamila Kolonomos. Upon her return from fighting with the Yugoslav resistance after the war, Kolonomos found herself in a community decimated, as 98% of the Macedonian Jews had perished during the conflict (Stein and Cohen 281).

In Vichy France, a parallel narrative unfolded. Without direct Nazi occupation, the majority of native-born Jews were largely protected, their acculturation and established networks enabling them to hide their children, relocate, or flee abroad (Sarah Stein, “France,” 2023). Conversely, foreign-born Jews lacking these advantages bore the brunt of Vichy's collaboration with the Nazi genocide, a contrast portrayed in a letter from French Jewish immigrant Bension Soulam, who was interned at a camp specifically for foreign Jews (Rittner and Roth 52). His firm advice to his wife regarding their children obtaining French citizenship documents underscores the safeguard that citizenship could provide.

Denmark's unwavering opposition to Nazi directives, led by both local leaders and citizens, significantly contributed to the survival of 98% of their Jewish population. Their resistance forced the Nazis to delay the Final Solution until 1943, at which point a defiant

German attaché tipped off the Danes about the Third Reich's deportation plans. This warning ignited a swift Danish-led rescue mission, enabling nearly 7,200 of Denmark's 8,000 Jews to escape to Sweden (Sarah Stein, "Northern Europe," 2023). Conversely, the Netherlands, despite its many similarities to Denmark, suffered the loss of most of their Jews due to widespread collaboration with the Nazis. This compliance is portrayed in Etty Hilleson's memoir, where she recounts a scene where a woman told a pleading mother, "There now, you're just an ordinary Jew, aren't you? So you'll just have to go, won't you..?" (Stein and Cohen 281). This widespread acquiescence was instrumental in the extermination of 75% of Dutch Jews.

Denmark's successful early resistance highlights how Germany's status in the war impacted their success in implementing the Final Solution. Initially, Germany's dominance provided some leeway in the pace of genocide. Faced with strong opposition, like in Denmark, the Nazis postponed their plans, confident of future opportunities. However, as the tide of the war shifted against Germany, the imminent threat of defeat accelerated the implementation of the Final Solution. The fate of Hungarian Jews, subjected to Nazi control late in the war, exemplifies this urgency. Their swift and brutal annihilation was driven by the impending German defeat and the consequential rush to complete the genocide (Bergen 257). The overarching goal of racial dominance in Europe meant that the war's progression and its triumphs or failures significantly influenced the genocide's intensity and pace.

Additionally, lessons drawn from earlier setbacks fueled the regime's heightened brutality in some implementations of the Final Solution. The German occupation of Greece, for example, immediately followed Denmark's successful Jewish evacuation. Greek Jews had certain advantages: the country's mountainous terrain could facilitate escapes, and much like the Danes, Greeks resisted the Nazi occupation. Athenians put their lives at risk to shelter Jews (Mazower

259), while townspeople bravely supplied food to Jewish detainees (Mazower 255). However, stung by the recent failure in Denmark, German authorities applied antisemitic laws with intensified rigor. This extra determination and brutality coupled with the lack of neighboring asylum countries led to the demise of 98% of Greek Jews (Sarah Stein, "Southern Europe," 2023). Thus, while conditions and resistance mirrored those in Denmark, Greece's Jewish population fell victim to geographical constraints and the Nazis' intensified resolve of the time.

The "Final Solution" was a complex and multifaceted operation that unfolded in disparate ways across various regions, reflecting the local cultural, political, and geographical context. From the brutal genocide in Eastern Europe to the defiance in Bulgaria and Denmark, the treatment of Jews during World War II was shaped by factors such as population size, acculturation, legal status, occupying power, resistance or collaboration, and the war's progression. The heterogeneous nature of the Final Solution's implementation underscores the vast variety in Jewish experience of the Holocaust and highlights the complexity and interconnectedness of events that shape our collective past.

References

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